

Camp Dutch Oven 101

What is a Camp Dutch Oven?

Most people are familiar with Dutch ovens that you can use in your stove. You can use cast iron Dutch ovens over coals as well, but there is a lot of work you need to do to convert them for this use. Instead, campers and outdoor cooks, use what is called the Camp Dutch Oven. These ovens have 3-4 legs on the bottom so that they stand up over the coals. The lid also has a lip around the top so that you can place coals on the top.



How do you select the right oven?

You can buy camp Dutch ovens at just about any store and in a variety of brands. Smaller ovens (8" diameter to 10" diameter) are mostly for desserts and breads or for a small 2 couple family. Larger ovens (12" diameter to 14" diameter) are for main courses and larger families. Ovens larger than 14" diameter can also be found for large groups.

When I get the oven home, then what?

Most Dutch ovens come in a box and are a light metal gray color and need to be seasoned. Ovens can also be purchased from the store that are already pre-seasoned. Pre-seasoned ovens should work great right out of the box. If you purchase an un-seasoned oven, you need to do the following prior to using.

1. Scrub the oven with hot soapy water.
2. Rub Crisco oil, or olive oil over the entire oven (inside and out plus inside and out on the lid too)
3. Place in a conventional oven at 350 – 400 degrees for 1 hour
4. At the end of the hour, leave the camp Dutch oven in your conventional oven until it has completely cooled.
5. Use your oven.

What you have done is put a non-stick coating around your oven. The more you use it the darker black it will become and the more seasoned it will be.

Word of caution..... Open all your windows in the house when you season the ovens. It will smoke and the oil cooks on. If you want to eliminate the smoke in the house, you can also put the ovens on your gas grill at 400 – 500 degrees for an hour as well. Then all of the smoke stays outside.

How do you cook with it?

A camp Dutch oven can cook any food that you would normally cook in a conventional oven. With the camp oven, you would place the appropriate number of hot coals (charcoal briquettes or wood coals) under the oven and then also on the top lid. With heat on the bottom and top, this cooks the food inside the oven just like at home. It is recommended, just like in your conventional oven to rotate the food you're cooking. In the camp oven, you just rotate (spin) the whole oven every 15 to 30 minutes. This helps make sure that there are no 'hot spots' and the food is cooked evenly.

If you have a recipe that you make at home (i.e. lasagna) you can make it in your camp oven too, using the same ingredients and same oven temperature. Following the grid below (from the Northwest Dutch Oven Society) you can tell how many coals need to go on the top and bottom.

Desired Temperature Range

Ten-Inch Oven : Twelve-Inch Oven

250-300 – Low

8 on top / 6 under : 10 on top / 8 under

300-350 – Medium

10 on top / 7 under : 12 on top / 9 under

350-400 – Hot

12 on top / 8 under : 14 on top / 10 under

400-450 - Very Hot

14 on top / 9 under : 16 on top / 12 under

Does weather affect it?

Most of the time, you can use the grid above and your food will be cooked to perfection. Wind, rain, and high altitudes can all impact your cooking though. Depending on how your food is cooking, you might need to add more or less coals to your oven. Most of the time, you shouldn't peak in and lift the lid (it lets the good heat escape), however, as you are learning and experimenting, go ahead and peak – you'll learn more that way!

How do you clean it up?

When you are done with your meal, put some water in the oven and put it back on some hot coals and let it boil. Scrape down the sides and empty out. Put some more water in and boil a second time. Empty it and place some oil in the bottom of the oven and rub it in with a paper towel, inside and out. Put a piece of paper towel in the oven so it hangs out over the edge and put the lid on.

Word of Caution..... Never pour cold water into a hot Dutch oven. It will crack the cast iron. When cleaning, wait until the oven is cooled and then place the water in it and re-heat it.

No soapy water – it can't be so?

The cleaning method described above is the recommended way to clean your oven. Remember that when you season your oven you use oils. When you clean with soapy water, it breaks down those oils and takes your non-stick coating off. You can do either method, just remember you'll have to re-season more frequently if you use soap.

I have an old Dutch oven and it is all rusty, can I still use it?

The nice thing about Dutch ovens is that you can always bring them back to life. If it is really rusty on the inside, take steel wool and rub the entire oven over. Then wash the oven with good hot soapy water and season as described above. It will bring the oven right back into use.



Foods to watch for!

Because the non-stick coating is oil certain foods can also remove it. The more acidic foods will breakdown your coating. If you cook a lot of lasagna in your oven, you'll just have to re-season more often as the tomato base will eat away at the coating. The same if you are doing the apple baked recipe in the cookbook. The orange juice can break down the coating as well. When food starts to stick – re-season!

Happy Cooking!!!